

# FIRST NATIONS EARLY LEARNING AND CHILD CARE ACTION PLAN



Assembly of First Nations  
April 2005

## VISION

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**The overall goal of the First Nations Early Learning and Child Care Action Plan is a First Nations controlled and sustainable child care system that adopts a holistic, culturally appropriate approach.**

An effective First Nations Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) network must be comprehensive and relevant to the needs of First Nations children, families and communities.

First Nations believe that the fundamental aspect to developing a responsive and comprehensive early learning and child care system for First Nations children requires an equal partnership with First Nations parents, Elders and communities.

First Nations ELCC programs and services must reflect the fact that First Nations children are members of distinct Nations and cultural groups, each with its own systems of beliefs, values, and traditions. First Nations communities must be supported to develop ELCC approaches based upon their own cultures.

A comprehensive First Nations ELCC system must be universally accessible to all children regardless of residency, geographic location, ability or need. Programs must be flexible enough to be responsive to infants and children with special needs. Adequate funding is required to ensure that all First Nations children are able to access needed services and programs.

## FIRST NATIONS PERSPECTIVES ON ELCC AND THE QUAD PRINCIPLES

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### FIRST NATIONS PERSPECTIVES ON ECD

*“We believe that the Creator has entrusted us with the sacred responsibility to raise our families...for we realize healthy families are the foundation of strong and healthy communities. The future of our communities lies with our children, who need to be nurtured within their families and communities” (RCAP, 1996)*

The above quote, taken from the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, clearly illustrates the value First Nations place on their children. Children are the core of the First Nation community. They represent the future and strength of our Nations.

The AFN paper "A Report of the Assembly of First Nations Early Childhood Development National Discussion (December 2003) states that "First Nations have the inherent right and responsibility to initiate, design, and control programs for their children. These programs and services are based on the laws given to us by the Creator and manifested in the beliefs and values of our people. Children are viewed as gifts to us". First Nations must define what "quality" child care is for them and for their children. First Nations values and beliefs must be the foundation for all policies, programs and principles which are developed for the care and education of First Nations children. This message was clearly heard in each regional dialogue session.

During the regional dialogue sessions, the legitimacy of the QUAD principles was not at issue however, the development of principles for First Nations prior to any discussion with First Nations was viewed as unacceptable. First Nations clearly indicated during the regional dialogue sessions that the principles for early learning and child care for First Nations must be developed by First Nations. These principles need to reflect the values, beliefs and traditions of First Nations in order to be truly effective and consistent with community needs and priorities. First Nations are diverse, not just region to region, but within one region. The fact that First Nations are so diverse requires creative, innovative and flexible ways of doing business. Flexibility is integral to developing policies, programs and funding regimes that will be effective and relevant for the over 600 First Nations communities across Canada.

## **ELCC ANNOUNCEMENT**

The February 2005 Federal Budget announced an investment of \$100 million over five years for First Nations Early Learning and Child Care. Although welcome, this amount was less than what was proposed by First Nations to meet the real needs of First Nations children and communities. There is a need for a significant investment and greater coordination at the federal level in order to address the gaps that currently exist in First Nations ELCC programming.

In the Winter of 2005, all ten First Nations regions participated in a regionally-led dialogue process with respect to the ELCC initiative.

There was widespread consensus that the development a culturally relevant curriculum is viewed as the primary, overarching principle for First Nations.

All regions emphasized the need to develop the child care curriculum or program in accordance with the cultural values and traditions of the community. The integration of First Nations language was also identified as a priority. Often times, provincial-territorial licensing regimes are an obstacle to developing culturally-relevant programming.

All regions raised the lack of infrastructure as a major challenge. Many First Nations do not have a building to house a child care program. In First Nations communities that do have a building, they lack the funds necessary for repairs and maintenance. This is an issue that needs to be analyzed separately from the services and programs issue. It requires a substantial investment and a complementary stream of funding. Clarification is required with respect to which federal department has responsibility for these capital costs.

First Nations support the concept of greater coordination and integration at the community level, but it was recognized in the dialogue process that this needs to also occur between federal and provincial departments with responsibility for First Nations child care. There was anticipation that greater integration should reduce the First Nations reporting burden and result in more efficient use of limited resources. It was also emphasized that integration must not result in a reduction of funding for First Nations children's programming and that any savings that may result be reinvested into First Nations children's programs rather than back into government coffers.

## FEEDBACK ON THE QUAD PRINCIPLES (Quality, Universality, Accessibility, and Developmental)

Common themes raised during regional dialogue sessions with respect to the federally developed QUAD principles, include:

### QUALITY

- ❖ The need for an adequate level of funding to provide competitive salaries and benefits for child care staff, the training of new staff and ongoing training for existing staff, was indicated
- ❖ Funding is required to support hiring administrative and support staff, such as a maintenance worker, administrative support and a cook.
- ❖ Federal funding must be delivered directly to First Nations communities and not through provincial or territorial governments. It was suggested that a bilateral relationship between First Nations and the federal government is preferable and would eliminate additional bureaucratic layers which may reduce the amount of funding reaching communities.
- ❖ Less bureaucracy and more funding flowing to the community child care centres for the benefit of First Nations children and families, are needed. First Nations expressed the frustration that too much funding appears to be siphoned off prior to reaching the community child care centre. There have been investments, but it is unclear how much funding actually makes it to the community. This must be addressed in order to build a system where it is easy for programs to integrate, with no penalty. Reporting

requirements must also change and be less burdensome. Ideally one report to one source.

- ❖ Funding and flexibility to develop programs to support parents and caregivers, and to develop culturally relevant programming such as language immersion and programs developed and led by Elders, were highlighted as key to success. It must be recognized that each First Nation community is different, there will be different needs and different priorities.
- ❖ Quality child care programs must be able to link with specialized diagnostic service providers such as speech pathologists, sight and hearing specialists, FASD assessments, learning specialists, etc. The necessary follow-up services must also be provided.
- ❖ Support for the development of licensing standards adapted to or developed by First Nations themselves, is essential. Regulatory and licensing regimes are too often a barrier to developing and implementing culturally relevant services in First Nations communities. There is little to no support for the imposition of provincial-territorial licensing regulations. While it is recognized that regulations and standards are important; these need to be developed by the First Nation community in order to reflect the community priorities and realities.
- ❖ As noted, a strong emphasis was placed on the need for an influx of capital dollars to build new child care facilities and to support renovations and upgrading of existing child care centres to ensure that the facilities are safe, stimulating environments for children to learn and develop.

## UNIVERSALITY

- ❖ Funding is required to support child care services for First Nations children with special needs. Children with special needs are too often undiagnosed and untreated. First Nations communities generally have little to no access to such services. An assessment of the level of need that exists is required. This has not been done in any comprehensive way and must be clarified in order to develop appropriate programming and related funding for First Nations children with special needs.
- ❖ There is a lack of services and programming available or appropriate for First Nations children and toddlers.
- ❖ This principle assumes that funding will be adequate to support the actual implementation of the child care program.

## ACCESSIBILITY

- ❖ The realities of small and remote communities must be taken into consideration in order to remove barriers to access. Small, remote communities often do not qualify for child care funding or receive a minimal amount which does not allow for the development of an effective program.
- ❖ There are First Nations communities with no child care facilities/programs.

- ❖ Determining whether or not a community has a Head Start program or a FNICC program is not sufficient as an outcome. This needs to be examined in greater detail - is the program meeting the need? How long are the waiting lists? What services are provided? Many child care centres in First Nations communities have long waiting lists due the lack of child care spaces.
- ❖ Many child care centres may wish to accept children with special needs into their centres, however, they simply do not have the resources, expertise or facilities for children with special needs.
- ❖ Jurisdictional disputes must be addressed and clarified. These disputes should not interfere with programs "on the ground" linking up in order to develop a higher quality service. A seamless continuum of programs linking prenatal services, child care services, parenting programs and the education system must be the objective.

## DEVELOPMENTAL

- ❖ There was agreement that child care services involve significantly more than just "babysitting". The nurturing of pre-school children is recognized as a vital service in supporting the learning of life skills, social skills, emotional and physical development and school readiness.
- ❖ First Nations believe that the community child care centre plays many key roles for children, parents and the community as a whole. First Nations envision the child care centre as a focal point to care for children and support parents.
- ❖ The development and maintenance of linkages with the formal school system was identified as priority. This will enable building a seamless child care continuum within the community. Currently, the method of funding the various programs is not conducive to working together.
- ❖ A safe, stimulating learning environment requires an adequate physical structure with quality learning tools and trained, experienced staff.
- ❖ Community development of a program inclusive of cultural values, beliefs and language, is at the root of a developmental approach. The involvement of Elders is especially critical.

Generally, it was felt that First Nations should develop their own principles and not be subject to principles developed by the federal government. Developing the principles and then requesting feedback does not reflect a collaborative approach.

Furthermore, if First Nations are expected to implement the QUAD principles, the funding provided to First Nations child care programming must be adequate. This is not the current reality. First Nations children's programming and child care centres are under-funded and numerous gaps exist. The theory of the QUAD principles is admirable, however, it is not realistic to claim these principles can be implemented at this point.

## LICENSING REGULATIONS AND STANDARDS

There was consensus that First Nations should develop and implement their own regulations and standards and that the regulations of the provincial-territorial governments not be imposed upon them. History has demonstrated that the licensing standards and regulations of provincial-territorial governments are not applicable to their realities and do not take into account the linguistic and cultural characteristics of First Nations communities. The “one-size-fits-all” approach will not be effective for First Nations communities. Community ownership and community involvement in the development of standards and regulations were emphasized in each regional dialogue session.

## THE DIRECTION FORWARD

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During the April 2004 Canada-Aboriginal Peoples Roundtable, the Prime Minister proposed a new relationship built on a principle of collaboration and aimed at transformative change. While First Nations are strongly encouraged by this call for a new partnership with Canada, significant advancements for First Nations will only be achieved with a mandate for change and commitment from both federal and provincial/territorial orders of government. During the initial Aboriginal Roundtable meeting held in April 2004, the Prime Minister stated: *“No longer will we in Ottawa develop policies first and discuss them with you later. This principle of collaboration will be the cornerstone of our new partnership”*.

In the 2005 Federal Budget, Finance Minister Goodale stated: *“For too long and in too many ways, Canada’s Aboriginal people—our first citizens—have been last in terms of opportunity in this country. The Government of Canada is committed to a new relationship, one based on partnership and respect and rooted in economic self-reliance.”* Developing, in partnership, a comprehensive ELCC network for First Nations would be consistent with this commitment. First Nations expect to be equal partners in developing and implementing an ELCC network for First Nations children and communities that will respond to the inequities and gaps which currently exist.

## FULL ENGAGEMENT WITH FIRST MINISTERS ON FIRST NATIONS ELCC

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A full, focused discussion by First Ministers on First Nations Early Learning and Child Care is necessary to establish the solid commitment of federal, provincial and territorial governments and an Action Plan to address systemic funding inequities and gaps which exist in First Nations child care. First Nations leaders must be fully involved in all negotiations that impact the care and well-being of First Nations children.

## THE FIRST NATIONS ELCC ACTION PLAN

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To achieve the vision of a comprehensive First Nations child care system, the First Nations Early Learning and Child Care Plan is premised on two key concepts:

- Sustainable, Flexible Funding That Meets First Nations Needs
- Coordination Towards A Holistic Approach

**Sustainable, Flexible Funding** requires funding matched to population growth, needs and real cost drivers, as well effective measurements to monitor and track spending. This will ensure that funding results in real improvement in First Nations child development outcomes. Ultimately, sustainability will only be achieved as progress is made to establish First Nations control, management and delivery of a comprehensive First Nations-developed child care system.

**Coordination of Program/Service Delivery** is essential to coordinate the patchwork of child care programming at the federal, provincial and municipal levels that creates the gaps which lead to the existing inequities. Integration would empower First Nations to integrate child care services and programs across jurisdictions to create a new holistic framework of First Nations child care programming.



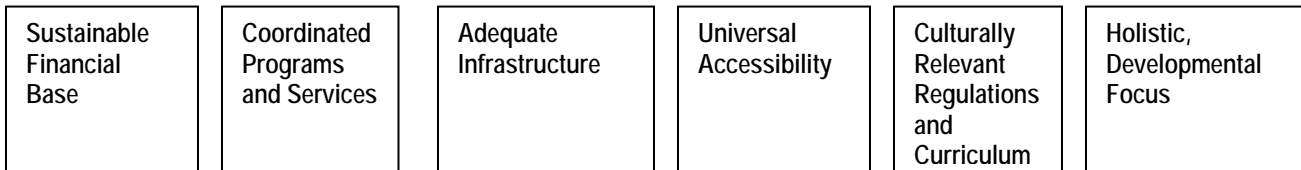
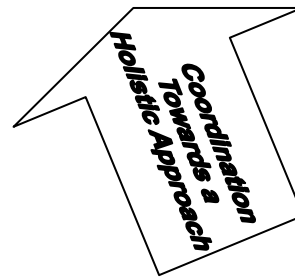
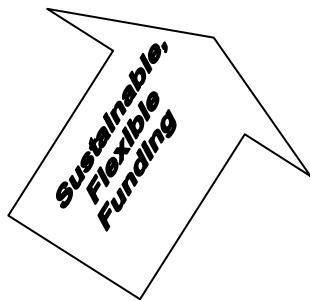
# ELEMENTS OF THE FIRST NATIONS ELCC ACTION PLAN

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The elements of the First Nations ELCC Action Plan are:

## First Nations ELCC Action Plan

**VISION:** First Nations controlled and sustainable early learning and child care system that adopts a culturally appropriate approach



1. Sustainable Financial Base
2. Coordinated Programs and Services
3. Adequate Infrastructure
4. Universal Accessibility
5. Culturally Relevant Regulations and Curriculum
6. Holistic, Developmental Focus

## **1. A SUSTAINABLE FINANCIAL BASE**

An investment of \$450 million over five years has been proposed to the federal government for First Nations early learning and child care. This estimate is based on an examination of population trends and existing gaps. The \$450 million does not take into account capital needs or other cost drivers such as inflation. A closer examination of these issues must be undertaken to develop a sustainable financial base for the future. The funding mechanisms used to distribute funds must be determined jointly, transparently and based on need. The mechanisms must be flexible enough to respond to the diverse needs of communities and should take into consideration cost drivers, population growth and the unique realities of northern, remote, small First Nations communities.

Flexibility in how child care funding is allocated is a critical priority for First Nations. First Nations are diverse - geographically, linguistically and culturally. They are at different stages of development, some are self-governing, some urban and others remote. These factors must be taken into consideration in determining how funding is allocated. The funding must reach those it is intended to benefit.

## **2. COORDINATED PROGRAMS AND SERVICES FOR CHILDREN AND PARENTS**

Existing programs and services are fragmented and funded by multiple sources. This has created silos and a heavy reporting burden on First Nations. Increased coordination of children's programs could be supported by First Nations provided that the priority is to develop a seamless continuum of care for the benefit of all First Nations children. A seamless continuum of care must be fully inclusive of children with special needs and infants. Holistic community child care programs should also incorporate support programs for parents and caregivers.

The objective of greater coordination of programs and services must not be to reduce government expenditures or government responsibility. First Nations emphasize that any savings accrued by the possible development of a single window approach be retained by First Nations for reinvestment in other children's programs.

## **3. ADEQUATE INFRASTRUCTURE**

The lack of infrastructure to house child care programs in First Nations communities is a significant challenge that has been largely neglected. Many First Nations operate their child care centres out of inadequate, old and at times unsafe facilities due to the lack of options. Other First Nations do not have a building accommodate a child care program making them ineligible to provide this much needed service. An infrastructure needs assessment is required to obtain a clear picture of the current situation. This is an issue

that must be examined as a separate issue requiring a separate funding envelope aside from the program and administration budget. Clarification is required with respect to which federal department has the responsibility for capital costs relating to child care facilities.

#### 4. UNIVERSAL ACCESSIBILITY

Early learning and child care programs must be universal and accessible to all that need the service. Far too often First Nations children with special needs are turned away or do not undergo the necessary assessments and treatment that they require in order to enjoy a good quality of life. The issue of services for children with special needs has been neglected for far too long.

Small, northern and remote First Nations communities often do not qualify for child care funding and if they do, the funding amounts are not adequate to support an effective early learning and child care network. First Nation children growing up on reserve are missing out on valuable services that ensure healthy lifelong learning and development. The unique characteristics of these communities must be taken into consideration in developing funding regimes and program criteria flexible enough to meet their needs.

#### 5. CULTURALLY RELEVANT REGULATIONS AND CURRICULUM

Cultural values, beliefs, traditions and language must be interwoven in all early learning and child care programming. Culture has been acknowledged to play a key role in developing physically and emotionally healthy children with high self esteem that it must become an integral component of the everyday operation of these programs. First Nations clearly stated that Elders need to be involved as advisors and teachers in the development and implementation of First Nations early learning and child care programs.

#### 6. HOLISTIC, DEVELOPMENTAL FOCUS

A holistic, developmental approach must be taken when developing programs and policies for First Nations children. A too narrow view will fail to take into account the role and influence of parents, extended family, Elders and community. Developing a seamless, continuous lifelong support system within the First Nations community is consistent with the First Nations worldview. The principles and regulations for such a system must not be imposed from the outside without the direct participation of First Nations.